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ABSTRACT

James Cook University, Queensland, Australia (JCU) and Malaspina University College, British Columbia (MUC) have developed a partnership model for the delivery of JCU's Masters degree in education in rural studies. The course was delivered via distance education from MUC. Program evaluation was conducted via questionnaires returned by 25 students from the first 2 cohorts and interviews with JCU and MUC staff. Findings indicate that the program has generally been successful for both students and staff. Students reported that they enjoyed the program and would recommend it to others. Two thirds of the students reported that it had already changed their work practices and, despite a number of criticisms concerning the delivery of the program, the majority found information and resource accessibility adequate. Staff at both MUC and JCU unanimously supported the program, finding it professionally rewarding and academically stimulating. The program has been financially successful, providing a steadily growing surplus. Problems identified include: a perceived lack of information from JCU regarding enrollment and subject offerings; problems in enrolling students; problems in advising students of subject results; lack of support in understanding and using technology; delays in return of assignments; inaccessibility of JCU staff; and a lack of communication between MUC thesis supervisors and students, and JCU thesis supervisors. Expansion of the course to include rural law enforcement and rural development is being considered. (TD)

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A PARTNERSHIP MODEL FOR THE OFFSHORE DELIVERY OF A RESEARCH MED IN RURAL STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

The Rural Education Research and Development Centre (RERDC), School of Education, James Cook University (JCU) and Malaspina University College (MUC), British Columbia, have developed a partnership model for the delivery of JCU's MEd (Hons) in Rural Studies. The program commenced in 1997 and has admitted three intakes. The first cohort is currently well advanced in the final (thesis) component of the course. The teaching and supervision model provides for JCU and MUC staff to work in pairs. Significant intercampus staff visitation has facilitated the development of the course as has an offshore supervisors' symposium. A recent evaluation of the course has highlighted strengths and weaknesses of the model as well as confirming some of the strategic and conceptual principles underpinning the development.

Introduction

In 1996 discussions between the Director, Rural Education Research and Development Centre (RERDC) at JCU and staff at the Malaspina University College (MUC), British Columbia (BC), were held at Nanaimo, Canada with a view to co-operate in the offering of professional development courses in rural, small and isolated communities in BC. The partnership was attractive to MUC because of JCU's focus in the field of rural education. The willingness of both institutions to adapt to meet the needs of students in BC facilitated the development of the initiative. The availability of studies at PhD level in rural education provided an additional incentive for both institutions.

In October 1996 the Director proposed to the School of Education that the MEd (Rural Education) be taught off-shore at Malaspina University College, Nanaimo, BC Canada, commencing 1997.

In April 1997 a formal agreement was signed by the Acting Vice-Chancellor, JCU and the President, MUC. The agreement provided the opportunity to exit the program after successfully completing two subjects (Postgraduate Certificate of Education) or after four subjects (Postgraduate Diploma of Education in Rural Education (PGDipEd). The degree of Master of Education in Rural Education or Master of Education (Honours) in Rural Education will be awarded upon the successful completion of the prescribed program. The agreement also provided for the opportunity for a candidate who exited from the program and subsequently wished to use

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units obtained as credit towards a higher award (PGDipEd, MEd or MEd(Hons)). This could be done by surrendering the qualifications so obtained to JCU before the higher qualification is awarded.

In 1997 the fee of AUD $2,000 per subject was set subject to annual review. The fee is collected by MUC. Twenty per cent was retained by MUC to cover costs including advertising and publicity, administration, library and Internet. The remaining 80 per cent was transferred to JCU. This proportion has subsequently changed to 30%.

It was agreed that a minimum of 15 enrolments was required to commence the program, unless agreed otherwise in writing by the parties. JCU agreed to provide a full MEd (Rural Education) degree course, lecturing and thesis supervision staff in conjunction with MUC, and study materials. MUC agreed to provide lecturer/tutor involvement in teaching and thesis supervision, program co-ordination assistance, Internet facilities, advertising and publicity, recruitment and enrolment, library facilities and required access to other resource collections, and program research and development input.

It was also agreed that all certificates, diplomas and MEd degrees would be awarded by JCU until the parties agreed otherwise.

Dr Montgomery successfully submitted a proposal to the BC Teacher Qualification Service to gain recognition of the MEd (Rural Studies) for purposes of salary status advancement of BC teachers. This approval requires that BC teachers undertaking masters degrees complete at least 50% course work in order to achieve appropriate recognition. Non-teachers are able to complete the award by completing two (or three) subjects and a thesis of four (or three) subject equivalents.

There have been three intakes to the MEd (Rural Education). In 1997 a cohort of 14 students enrolled in the program; in 1998 a second cohort of 12 enrolled; and in 1999 a third cohort numbering 11 have enrolled.

Evaluation of program

The review methodology and analysis of results were simple, consisting of email questionnaires and interviews. Results are reported as frequency distributions and summaries of comments.

- All students in the first and second cohort were sent email questionnaires which canvassed opinion on various program matters including the program curriculum, resources and resource access, administration of the program, and general considerations. Student progression in the program was also charted. The third cohort was not included because they had just commenced the program.

- Staff at JCU involved in teaching particular courses were interviewed using a structured set of questions and JCU staff involved in supervising theses of students in the program were surveyed seeking comment on their involvement. Staff at MUC involved in teaching the program were emailed a series of questions seeking comment and staff at MUC involved in supervising theses were also surveyed by email.

- The finances associated with the program were examined and are reported.

The student questionnaire was developed after discussions with lecturers at JCU involved in the program. Comment was sought on the draft questionnaire from Dr McSwan (JCU) and Dr Montgomery (MUC) and subsequently amended. The questionnaire was distributed to all students involved in the first and second cohorts. The student email addresses were provided by staff at MUC. Three follow-up letters were sent to students who did not respond to the invitation to complete the questionnaire. Regrettably, there was less than a 100% return rate explained partly by the fact that the survey was undertaken during MUC's summer vacation period.

Staff interview questions and survey schedule were developed following discussions with teaching staff and thesis supervisors. Existing documentation provided useful reference points for this process.

From these data some comments and recommendations have been generated for consideration.

Results

A. PERSONAL INFORMATION

Cohort 1: N=14

Cohort 2: N=11

Q1. Occupational area

Table 1: Occupational area

Occupation	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Total	%
Education	3	2	5	
Elementary		2	2	
Secondary				
Tertiary	4	2	6	
Other	2	1	2	
Teacher	1		2	
Administrator	3	2	3	74%
Other	1		3	
Rural Development				26%
Rural Health				
Community Support				

The majority of students (74%) are involved in various levels of education although a small number are located in other occupations such as community support and community development.

Q2. City/town where you live

Only a few students indicated their geographic location which ranged over various parts of British Columbia (BC) including such places as Ladysmith, Nanaimo, Queen Charlotte City, Gabriola Island, Cedar Community, Terrace, Duncan, Revelsoke, Crofton, Zeballos and Bamfield.

Q3. Position in the program

Table 2 Position in the program

Position in program	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Total
Completed 3 subjects and have begun thesis	6	1	7
Completed 3 subjects		4	4
Completed 2 subjects			
Completed 2 subjects and have begun thesis	3	2	5
Completed 1 subject		1	1

B. CURRICULUM

Q4. Is the overall curriculum content relevant to your professional needs?

Table 3: Relevance to professional needs

Relevance	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Total N=17	%
Yes	8	7	15	88
No	1	1	2	12

This question asked if the curriculum content was relevant to the professional needs of participants in the program. The responses indicate that 88% believe that the content of the curriculum is relevant. Students commented that studying Aboriginal and First Nations will be extremely helpful, that "the course on rural studies helped ", "coursework in qualitative research was wonderful", "understand the nature of rurality better", "was particularly useful" and that "much of the information is applicable to any classroom"; another noted that "rural and indigenous elements" in particular were helpful. Students commented on the freedom given in the course to focus on interests and areas relevant to students. Those who commented negatively said that the program was too geared for teachers and that a subject on community development would be a welcome addition to the curriculum.

Q5. Are there unnecessary overlaps in curriculum content?

Students in both groups stated unanimously that there were no unnecessary overlaps of curriculum content.

Q6. Are there content areas not covered that you would like covered?

Table 4: Content areas not covered

Content areas you wish to be covered	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Total N=16	%
Yes	4	3	7	44
No	4	5	9	56

Those who answered in the affirmative again indicated a wish to have a subject on rural development while another asked for more material on "rural people who have transitioned to urban settings". In relation to the subject on research methodology it was suggested that more emphasis on analysis of quantitative and qualitative data would be useful while another student suggested that more attention be given to developing the thesis idea. One student suggested that more support in technology and APA [style] would have been helpful.

Q7 General comments on curriculum

Comments ranged from "I am completely satisfied with the program", "I am challenged by all of it" and "was a good cross-section of rural topics" to "I think it could be streamlined". Two students commented on the research methodology subject suggesting that it might be better offered as subject number three because progression to the thesis proposal would be better. (This has been done for Cohort 2). A student from the second cohort wished that examples of the previous cohort's thesis proposals had been provided in the research methodology subject. Another student suggested that "more technology tutorials should have been arranged".

C. RESOURCES AND RESOURCE ACCESS

Q8. Have the curriculum materials provided adequate resources?

Table 5: Adequacy of resource provision

Adequacy of provision	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Total N=17	%
Yes	7	6	13	76
No	2	2	4	24

This section of the questionnaire asked students to comment on the adequacy of resource provision, especially access to library and electronic resources. There is clear agreement concerning the adequacy of curriculum resources (74%). Students commented that these materials are "just a start" and that they are "adequate to get one started". Another student suggested that the "texts are a useful place to begin".

Q9. Have MUC/JCU library and electronic resources been adequate?

Table 6: Adequacy of library and electronic resources

Adequacy of library/ electronic resources	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Totai N=16	%
Yes	4	6	10	63
No	4	2	6	37

Opinion is more clearly divided on the adequacy of library and electronic resources. Comments suggest that many students have found alternative sources for resources including visiting other university libraries. Students commented on the helpfulness and "excellent service" of MUC Library staff and academic staff although one student commented that email requests had been ignored while another noted that "by the time a reference arrives it is time to send it back again". One student noted that MUC seems to be building up relevant materials". Students from both cohorts believe that more "orientation" (presumably instruction) on the library system and finding information on journal articles would have been helpful. One student suggested a tutorial on the software *Endnote*.

Q10. Have you been able to use other resources (e.g., local library)?

Table 7: Use of alternative sources

Alternative sources	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Total N=17	%
Yes	5	6	11	65
No	4	2	6	35

Many students have found it difficult to access alternative resources because of their remoteness and distance from other libraries. Two students use University of Victoria and UBC libraries regularly. Three noted that they have no local library although a few commented that they "use" the Internet. Some also indicated that they use each other's resources and borrow from other professionals one student noting that "it is very time consuming".

Q11. Have JCU/MUC resources been readily available?

Table 8: Accessibility of MUC/JCU resources

MUC/JCU resource accessibility	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Total N=17	%
Yes	5	8	13	76
No	4	0	4	34

Comments varied from "instructors were lending out material from their personal libraries" to

"JCU access was built around time constraints I could not adhere to". One student commented that he was "not sure how to access JCU's resources" while another has "not done anything through JCU". Others praised the efforts of MUC library staff although one student commented that there were "heavy fines for overdues" . Another student suggested that "thesis copies and proposal examples ... were not helpful as they did not conform to the standards by which my proposal was evaluated".

D. ADMINISTRATION

Q13. Have you found the administration of the program effective?

Table 9: Administration effectiveness

Administration effectiveness	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Total	%
Yes	6	7	13	76
No	3	1	4	34

Despite the large number who registered that they thought that the program was effectively administered (76) several did provide various negative comments which ranged from a fairly generous "it has been challenging to develop an ongoing relationship with anyone at JCU" and "everyone is trying" to "have found numerous inconsistencies ... JCU delivers one idea and then it is reversed by MUC and vice versa" and "I found the program very disorganised". Another said that "marks could be returned somewhat quicker".

Q14. Has information regarding course offerings, enrolments, results been readily accessible and timely?

Table 10: Information on course offerings, enrolments, etc.

Administration information accessible	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Total N=17	%
Yes	5	4	9	53
No	4	4	8	47

One student who answered "yes" commented "yes, because I am a seasoned student and know what questions to ask". Another student gave a qualified "to a certain degree". This question elicited considerable negative comment including "slow and slower", "received readings at the last minute each time", "except the research course ... assignments returned months after being turned in", "the time gap between assignment completion and mark distribution is generally lengthy" and "receiving course marks [with] up to six months delay is educationally unsound". Another student said that he waited "over three months to receive feedback".

Q15. Has information regarding presentation of assignments, information on progress in the course, etc been adequate?

Table 11: Information on assignment presentation, progress in course, etc

Assignment information, etc	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Total N=15	%
Yes	5	6	11	73
No	2	2	4	37

Comments included statements such as "all courses were exceptionally well organised ... effectiveness of (subject) delivery according to the relationship struck between MUC and JCU instructors". Another student said "Yes but the cultures subject was the only exception" and "the first subject on cross cultures was very mixed up"

Q16. Have arrangements relating to the supervision and preparation of theses been adequate (cohort 1 only)?

Table 12: Adequacy of supervision of theses

Adequacy of thesis supervision	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Total N=9	%
Yes	5	0	5	56
No	4	0	4	44

Positive comments included "MUC don't always have the answers but they find them for you", "my MUC supervisor is encouraging", and "feedback has been supportive and specific". Negative comments included: "I have still not been officially/personally notified of the Au (sic) supervising my thesis", "there is a distinct lack of 'guidance through the process", "I hardly feel I have a relationship with my Australian supervisor" to "I have been waiting a month for comment on work ... one supervisor seems reluctant to criticise ideas".

This issue needs to be addressed, especially by staff at JCU.

Q17. Any general comments on administration

Generally, comments were positive. MUC staff were commended for trying "hard to accommodate us" "for soothing my fears" and another noted that "I am particularly happy with my JCU advisor". One student , however, noted that one "Prof didn't seem to take the opportunity to listen" when given feedback and another student was "was amazed at the casual manner in which the time frame was extended" for the program from a two-year cycle to three years.

E. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

Q18 Have you enjoyed the program overall?

Table 13: Overall enjoyment of program

Enjoyment of program	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Total N=16	%
Yes	8	8	16	100
No	0	0	0	0

Despite some of the negative comment noted above, there is an overwhelming view from students that they find the program enjoyable. Positive comments included "a wonderful experience", "immensely", "inspiring to find a topic and research material" and "it has provided me with an incredible opportunity to grow". One student noted that "subjects, yes, research and content, yes, thesis process, no".

Q19. As a result of this program have you changed your work practices and/or career aspirations?

Table 14: Change in work practices

Change in work practices	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Total N=17	%
Yes	6	7	13	76
No	3	1	4	34

Respondents commented that they had thought "more about what I am doing", that they were "more global in ... my perspectives for the future" and "where I will spend the next ten years of my career". Another noted that s/he had "been offered a VP position" and attributed that to the course and one student commented that he was "intrigued how the theoretical can be incorporated into my class ..."

Q20. Would you recommend this program to others in your profession?

Table 15. Recommendation to others

Course recommendation	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Total N=16	%
Yes	7	7	14	88
No	1	1	2	12

Some students noted that they have mentioned it to people they work with ("I tell people about it all the time") and offer "pros and cons". One student "would advise others to go elsewhere" and one castigated the surveyors for asking for any contacts to whom information might be sent . Only one student provided the name of a prospective student. However, 88% of

students would recommend the program to others in their profession.

Q21. Why did you choose this program over Canadian and US offerings?

Students offered the following reasons

Able to do it at home as distance education program

A hearty recommendation from two close friends

Seemed relevant ... and offered a thesis component

Physical proximity to Malaspina and previous experience with college

Connection with the Dean of Education

Was in the location where I wanted to apply the learning

To my knowledge there is no similar program

Q22. Compared with what it might cost you to do a similar Masters course elsewhere, do you think that the JCU/MUC course offers value for money?

Five students agreed that this course offered value for money, two indicated that it was "competitive" while another two students said that "The $12,000 is just a lot of money" and "it is more costly than others". One student said that "all masters programs are too expensive" Another commented that "UVic offers MEd programs which are less costly (half the price) while another said that "the cost of doing a degree at any of the three major universities in BC is generally about C$20,000! One student wondered "where the fees do go".

23. What do you see (in order of importance) as the three main strengths of the program?

Students commented that they were able to work from home, that it is flexible, that it meets students' needs, that it is interesting and that MUC faculty have excellent teaching/supportive/encouraging credentials. Additional comments included: continue to work full time; extending rural education information; the promotion of rural work"; cost; the warmth and attention of people at MUC ... the warmth and attention of most people involved in the program; ability to work at one's own pace; MUC faculty with rural experience; JCU reputation in rural research area; very appropriate area of research; an opportunity to develop a research centre in BC; good balance of courses and thesis requirements; the small amount of classroom lecture demands; freedom of finding a research topic; the interactive nature of the webct (sic) communication with fellow classmates; a free reign in choosing thesis topic; working and studying at the same time without having to give up my summers somewhere else; pulling people in from such diverse work situations and giving them an opportunity to share what they know and have experienced; available; good intentions; one of its kind in the world; time frame is more than adequate; lots of freedom and latitude to do as I wish; distance ed component; relevance of material; quality of Australian course design and instructors; access from a distance and focus on local community; manageability – one project at a time; serves the needs of a variety of professionals; appropriate to the needs of rural communities, costs; willingness and commitment of everyone involved; and the library services.

Q24. What do you see as the three major weaknesses of the program?

Weaknesses suggested by students include: program relies heavily on technology... difficulty of technical communication and transfer of assignments; communications breakdowns; JCU/MUC unclear expectations; costly; delays in feedback. Additional comments included:

(lack of) face-to-face discussions; lack of regular contact with peers; not being in a class on a regular basis; dealing with two universities; lack of access to journal articles; lack of support in area of technology; Canadian/Australian differences (educational, cultural); lack of relevant Canadian resources; turn-around time for Au response; focus on Australian research rather than international focus; difficulty of establishing a supportive network within the class; Australian marking system does not line up with Canadian; too little time with fellow students ... discussing a topic online is not the same; need more and better instruction on how to do searches and how to use the Internet; disorganisation; lack of computer strengths by students. too ambitious; it is young; distance between instructor pairs hampering their effectiveness; integrating webct (sic) into course format.

Additional comments

I have enjoyed the program and have grown significantly as a result of my studies: valuable experience .. can't wait until the thesis is complete, this is a good opportunity to develop a much needed research centre in Rural Education involving local skills and knowledge. I wouldn't trade it for the world; in email discussions someone should chair or monitor and call upon some students who seem reticent to express opinions; the workload was unnecessary .... constantly rushing through an unreal schedule: I appreciate the opportunity to share my experiences ... question 20 was an insult to the process.

STAFF

The academic program

The MEd (Rural Studies) offered in the project is at honours level; that is, the course requires completion of the following program: two required subjects, ED 5901 Rural Studies (Dr J Montgomery, MUC and Dr D McSwan, JCU) and ED5113 Foundations of Qualitative Educational Research (Dr M Grant, MUC, and Dr K Martinez, JCU); one elective, the one offered because of the particular needs of the program being ED5701 Teaching Across Cultures (Dr K Pepper-Smith, MUC, and Assoc. Prof B Osborne, JCU); and thesis.

Subject delivery and thesis supervision

Each subject is delivered by two academics, one from JCU and one from MUC. Initially, the JCU lecturer has taken the lead in planning,

teaching and assessing the subject. As the second and third offerings of

subjects have occurred, the MUC academics have taken a greater role in

teaching. However, as the program is a JCU course and the degree awarded

by JCU, the final responsibility in all academic matters remains with JCU staff.

In practice there has been a high level of co-operation and mutual respect between JCU and MUC academic staff. The actual arrangements for teaching the subjects have been flexible. In one subject the JCU lecturer has visited Malaspina to teach each of the three cohorts in partnership with the MUC colleague. In another the JCU lecturer visited to teach the first cohort in partnership. For the second cohort the face-to-face teaching was conducted by the MUC academic with the JCU lecturer providing support with learning materials and completing assessment. In the third subject the materials were prepared in the Vacation School mode used in the School of Education; that is, subject materials, readings and assessment were prepared in print form and provided to students before attending vacation school sessions. The JCU academic prepared these materials and the major face-to-face teaching during the vacation school was undertaken by the MUC academic. The JCU lecturer supplemented this

teaching with teleconferences and email contact with students.

Thesis supervision has also been conducted on a collaborative basis with each student having two supervisors, one from JCU and one from MUC.

Thesis writing started in earnest at the beginning of 1999.

Views of academics involved in the project

The views of academics involved in the program have been collected using three instruments. Each academic from JCU teaching in the program (3 people) has been interviewed; each academic from MUC teaching in the program (3 people) has been surveyed; and all academics from both institutions who have been supervising theses (12 people) have been surveyed. In July 1999 a symposium was held attended by most of the academic staff from both JCU and MUC who are involved in thesis supervision in the program. This was to consider issues in the supervision process. Notes from this symposium have also been used in writing this report.

Responses of JCU Academic Staff Teaching in the Program.

Each of the 3 staff members was interviewed separately.

1. Have adminstrative arrangements at JCU been satisfactory?

Staff agree that the administrative arrangements at JCU have been variable. Staff matters such as travel have been satisfactory. However, matters related to students such as enrolment, maintenance of class lists and reporting of results have been quite unsatisfactory in many instances. Reasons for this are not clear. It may be because of inadequate communication between various units within the University, for example, School of Education, Faculty, Postgraduate Admissions, Overseas Student Office. It is certainly the case that the University procedures for approving subject results and notifying students is inflexible. There are instances of students not having been notified of results until six months after the subject has been completed. If the University supports flexible modes of course delivery, as it apparently claims to, administrative procedures need to be modified in accord with this.

Steps are being taken to address some of these problems. For example, students in the third cohort have been enrolled in all subjects and the thesis at their initial enrolment to minimise processes.

2. Have administrative arrangements at MUC been satisfactory?

All lecturers believed administrative arrangements within MUC have been satisfactory characterised by one respondent as "generally efficient and helpful". Some administration at the interface of MUC and JCU have caused problems, for example enrolment procedures, compatibility of electronic communication systems. One respondent suggested that MUC administrative staff should have been given more guidance.

3. Are MUC and JCU masters students comparable?

One respondent saw both groups of students as comparable. The two others agreed that MUC students and JCU students had differences in their undergraduate backgrounds which were reflected in their approach to the masters program. They believed that the MUC students had different understanding and skills in research and scholarly writing. However, they were seen to adapt to JCU requirements very quickly. All agreed that the MUC students had high levels of commitment and enthusiasm. One respondent noted the cultural differences that Australian and Canadian students exhibited in the academic cultural context.

4. What effect, if any, has the program had on your workload?

Initially JCU staff had the option of teaching a subject in the program on a paid basis, that is, above the normal workload. One member of staff took this option once. Subsequently, all subjects have been taught as part of normal load. Staff are happy with this arrangement. One staff member who has taught in the program and has been the initiator of the project and coordinator finds the administrative load demanding. He has felt a personal responsibility to "keep the focus".

All staff were enthusiastic about the program but find that it makes demands on their time, especially as the timing of teaching is not synchronous with their other JCU teaching.

5. Are there alternative modes of delivery you would suggest? Do you think videoconferencing would be valuable?

There has been a wide range of strategies adopted. One respondent believes strongly that face to face personal contact needs to be maintained between student and JCU and/or MUC lecturer, commenting that "using technology such as videoconferencing would be second best". The other two respondents see a place for the use of various technologies. One taught from Malispina his MUC and Cairns students simultaneously by video link-up. He has also used web conferencing and believes this technology has "exciting potential". The third respondent also believes there is a place for more use of technology used in a mixed mode, for example, web, electronic delivery of materials, audioconferencing with face-to-face tutorials at MUC. It is also noted that all three JCU staff who have taught in the program have visited MUC and met staff and most of the students. One respondent stated the need for inter-institutional visits and noted that five staff have visited MUC and a further three expect to visit by the end of 1999.

6. Have you found MUC staff helpful and cooperative?

All staff have found the MUC administrative staff most helpful and efficient. They have found MUC academic staff very professional, cooperative and enthusiastic. They note that academic staff have had to adjust to the British approach to thesis writing and supervision which differs in some respects from that in North America.

7. Are MUC staff appropriately qualified and comparable to JCU staff?

All agree that MUC teaching staff are well qualified. They all have PhDs. They have gradually taken greater responsibility for teaching and JCU staff are satisfied in the way this transfer has proceeded.

8. Can you suggest ways to improve the program?

One respondent suggested greater attention to the cross-cultural and cross-institutional issues that are involved in such a project. Another comment stressed the need to continue to see the project as a partnership between equals. It was noted that demand for places in the program could be increased by attracting more non-teacher enrolments. This would involve subjects in rural community development and rural economic issues.

9. Do you have any other comments on the project?

All three respondents were most enthusiastic about the program and their participation in it. One saw it as valuable to JCU staff in that they had to reflect on their teaching and supervision

practices and explain them to academics from a different tradition. It was also pointed out that as scrutiny of completion rates has increased throughout the Australian university system this program has so far demonstrated high continuation rates which bode well for JCU's completion rates. It was noted by two respondents that the general principles of the joint program could be used to develop similar projects in British Columbia and other regions of North America. Already the BC Training Qualification Service has recognised the program and recommended it to students. Also, there has been interest from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police for a similar program with a rural law enforcement focus.

Views of MUC Staff Teaching in the Program

The three staff were emailed questionnaires. Two reminders were sent. Two responses were received.

1. Have you found the administrative arrangements satisfactory?

One respondent observed that "if we had waited until we had invented perfect systems we would never get a program up and running". He also noted that there have been "small glitches emerging throughout the program but that "always individuals involved have been totally supportive". Particular problems noted were the very slow proposal approval, slow ethics approval and slow return of student results.

2. Have you found JCU academic staff cooperative and helpful?

Both respondents were strongly affirmative; "without question, yes"; "yes... absolutely".

3. Are there alternative modes of delivery that you would suggest?

One respondent answered "no". The other noted that initially software problems were frustrating and early experiences with new Malaspina system were "just horrible but ... the bugs are gone now"

4. Are there any changes you would suggest to improve the program?
One suggested that the subjects be extended from 4 months to 6 months but that this could reduce the time available for the thesis. Another suggested that that working initially with fewer JCU supervisors would be preferable.

5. Have you found working in the program enjoyable and professionally rewarding?
Both respondents agreed they had. "absolutely positive professional experience".

Views of Academic Staff Engaged in Thesis Supervision

When this review was in the planning stages, the reviewers believed that, as the thesis writing stage was only beginning, there was little need to review this part of the program. However, as the review progressed it became apparent that there were issues involved that needed to be considered. Hence, a brief supplementary questionnaire was distributed. Further, it should be noted that, since this review began, there has been a workshop on supervision conducted in Fiji to which all supervisors from both institutions were invited.

Of the 12 staff from both institutuions listed as involved in thesis supervision 10 responses were received. Of these, one respondent advised that although he was listed as a supervisor he had not yet begun the process of supervision so returned a nil response. So, in all, 9 responses were used. Not all respondents answered all questions and not all questions required a simple Yes/No answer.

1. Did you find the advice regarding supervision that you received prior to beginning

supervision adequate?

YES 5 NO 2

Interestingly, the Yes responses were mainly from the MUC staff. However, these were qualified in most cases with comments such as "At the time the information was given it was adequate. ... When I received my students it became obvious that it was not inadequate but contradictory [in relation to the JCU Manual]". Other comments included "David McSwan was very patient in providing us with valuable information"; "I appreciated the seminar given by Ken Smith ... more of the same would be useful"

The 2 no answers were from JCU. However this was qualified by statements such as "I have had a lot of experience regarding supervision"; "I just flew into it".

2. Have you found the experience of supervision in this program helpful in your own understanding and practice of supervision?

Of the respondents who answered this question 6 said Yes. There were no negative responses. In particular, the JCU staff were generally most enthusiastic. Comments included, "Yep, it's great"; and "I have very much enjoyed being a co-supervisor with a Canadian academic". They valued the opportunity provided to discuss supervision with staff from a different academic tradition and to reflect on their own practices. One MUC responded "Absolutely. I see that I have learned a great deal about supervision". Others had not supervised before and appeared tentative in their responses. "As a novice I believe I could be much more effective if I could work as part of a committee" (the North American system): and "My problem is that I am not a regular instructor in the program and as such do not have a handle on the level of development of the rest of the students".

3. Do you have any comments on the similarities/differences between Canadian and Australian supervision processes and thesis outcomes?

There were 3 direct Yes responses and 1 direct No. Some interesting points were made. "[My Canadian co-supervisor] and I were pretty much in agreement about standards"; "Because I had not actually met my co-supervisor I was not certain what she had said to the student. Now that we have met ... I feel much more comfortable. All communication [now] goes to the three of us"; and "The primary area seems to be in the area of contact time. In Canada usually the supervisor spends a great deal of time with the student"

4. Do you have any other comments?

Four respondents provided comments. They were all positive and indicated a commitment to the program. One JCU supervisor plans SSP in 2000 to include visits to MUC and to his students in their home locations; three respondents praised the Fiji meeting as pleasant, productive and helpful and one suggested it should be a regular event for each new cohort; and another stated, "I have learned a great deal from our Australian counterparts, most specifically Paul Pagliano and Barry Osborne".

FINANCE

Terms of agreement

Under the terms of the agreement between MUC and JCU which established the joint program the following financial arrangements were accepted.

1. A tuition fee of $A2,000 per subject. As the MEd consists of 3 subjects and a thesis (equivalent to 3 subjects) the total course fee, assuming completion in minimal time, is

$A12,000

1. The income generated from tuition fees to be divided between JCU (80%) and MUC (20%).

Both these arrangements could be reviewed and changed by mutual agreement annually. As MUC took a greater responsibility for teaching the course from he second intake of students in 1998 the fee division was changed to a 70%, 30% division. Fees are collected by MUC and, after deducting its share, the balance is transferred to JCU. This is lodged in a School of Education account and controlled by the Head of School.

Following the enrolment of the first cohort of students in 1997 there has been a continuing demand for places in the program. This has resulted in two more cohorts of students being enrolled in 1998 and 1999.

4 3 **Annual income and expenditure**

Since the program began the annual income and expenditure has been as follows.

	Income A$	Expenditure $A	Balance $A	Carried Forward A$
1997	$16,400	$9,634	$6.766	$6,766
1998	$37,438	$33,369	$4,069	$10,835
1999*	$69,990	$10,003	$59,987	$70,822

*As per statement to 6.8.99. Outstanding commitments have been included in expenditure for 1999.

DISCUSSION

General

The program has, in general , been successful both for students and staff. The students report unanimously that they are enjoying the program and with only one exception would recommend it to others. Two thirds of the students find that it has already changed their work practices and, despite a number of criticisms concerning the delivery of the program, the overwhelming majority find information and resource accessibility adequate.

Lecturing staff at both MUC and JCU are also unanimous in their support for the program, finding it professionally rewarding and academically stimulating.

The program has also been financially successful, providing a steadily growing surplus.

Given the academic and financial success of the program it is the view of the reviewers that it is to the advantage of both JCU and MUC to maintain it and to explore ways of expanding it

Changes needed and/or conditions which have emerged since the inception of the program

Some conditions have changed since the inception of the program and much experience has been gained in implementation. This process has revealed a number of problems which need to be addressed. Some of these relate to one institution only and others to the relationship between them.

Administrative arrangements

Since the program began, a number of concerns have arisen in relation to both the general administration and the academic administration. These concerns have mainly focussed on JCU.

Particular concerns about general administration have been:

- perceived lack of information from JCU regarding enrolment, subject offerings etc.;
- problems in enrolling students;
- problems in advising students of subject results; and
- lack of support in understanding and using technology.

Particular concerns regarding academic administration have been:

- undue delays in return of assignments;
- inaccessibility of JCU academic staff; and
- lack of communication between MUC thesis supervisors and students on the one hand and JCU thesis supervisors on the other

Electronic communication

Even within the space of two years since the program began, there have been advances in electronic communication and a greater awareness of its potential in distance education. Initially, there were major problems in electronic communication between MUC and JCU. Contributing to this may have been the installation of a new system at MUC simultaneously with the beginning of the program. These initial problems have now been largely solved. However, the general issue of the use of electronic communication in the program needs to be addressed. Students comment frequently on simple problems such as the ability of supervisors, especially at MUC, not being able to open attachments. Students perceive that JCU library electronic resources were not easily accessible. This suggests that JCU Library staff be more adequately briefed and involved in the delivery of the program.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The strength of the program is in the academic area, with strong approval by students and academic staff. It is pleasing to note that the comments on administration by Cohort 2 are more positive than those of Cohort 1.

There have already been expressions of interest for similar programs in BC. These include programs in rural law enforcement to service RCMP personnel; community development, and offerings suitable to federal and provincial public servants. Of special significance has been an approach from Dr J Shelton, Director, Program for Rural Services and Research, to develop a joint program with the Rural Development Centre. University of Alabama. Other opportunities may exist in offering masters programs in other faculties, for example, in rural law enforcement. Such courses could share common teaching subjects. It is assumed that for

programs proposed in BC MUC would be included in initial negotiations.

JCU has embraced flexible delivery of courses. Implicit in this is the need to revise administrative procedures so that they support and encourage such flexibility. This requires, at least, the ability for students to enrol at various times during semester and to be able to receive their results shortly after completing requirements for a subject.

There have clearly been problems of communication between students and staff. Staff should be proactive in establishing communication with and responding to students. Since the inception of the MUC/JCU partnership, the School of Education has reviewed its domestic MEd program and accepted a Service Guarantee Statement for students. It is equally applicable to this program.

Given the concerns of students that JCU thesis supervisors appear to be inaccessible and that sometimes advice from the two supervisors is not consistent, it is essential that initial contacts be early, open and inclusive. The recent development of *Degree rules and guidelines for thesis: Master of Education (Hons) in Rural Studies* should assist in dealing with many procedural issues.

Students undertaking this program have access to JCU library resources but it is not clear that they are fully aware of the off-campus library services available or of the extensive electronic resources available through the JCU Library. Some students also expressed concern regarding their information literacy skills. Staff at both libraries could co-operate to develop appropriate information literacy packages.

In conclusion it is clear that the program to date has been very valuable to the School of Education. At a time when enrolments in the MEd have dropped considerably, the Rural Studies program is one of only two that have maintained enrolments. Further, at a time when course retention rates are becoming increasingly important in the University and across the university system, the high retention rate to date will boost the overall rate within the School. It has provided a steady and growing financial surplus to the School. It has also provided stimulating professional development for academic staff. It has led them to reflect on their supervision skills and to examine their approaches to teaching students from a different academic culture. Institutional links have been developed through staff visits to MUC and students *in situ*.

Many of the positive outcomes of this program for the School of Education are also beneficial for JCU as a whole: increased financial resources, higher postgraduate enrolments and higher retention rates. As well, it has enhanced the University's profile in North America and opened up possibilities for the development of masters courses to be offered in North America by other schools and departments.

MUC has been able to collaborate in offering a course at masters level for the first time and achieve a financial return in the process. It has enabled staff to gain experience in graduate supervision and allowed them the opportunity to work in productive partnership with Australian colleagues. As with JCU, it has opened up possibilities to develop further similar programs.